

## Against the Grain

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# Issues in Vendor/Library Relations-That's Entertainment

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# Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — That's Entertainment

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**L**ike tax returns, wills, and insurance applications, expense reports are a nuisance, easy to put off, painful to write, potentially embarrassing, one of those tasks instantly dismissed from mind once finished and filed at last.

But they're a fact of life, a fact of business life anyway. Who knows how many thousands, tens of thousands more likely, are generated every year as a by-product of our sales trips, presentations, conferences, workshops, and the rest of it in this library business? Like the amount of time that someone or other calculates each of us spends in a year waiting at red lights, or brushing our teeth, the annual hours poured into the authorship of presentable expense reports is one of those numbers we don't really want to know.

The only time you read anything about expense reports is of course when someone digs up something scandalous on a public official or employee — on occasion a librarian — and one or another *Freedom of Information Act* has made it possible for a reporter or blogger to pry loose expense reports detailing the kind of high living that's best kept under wraps. Or when a bailout company like the **American International Group** gets caught spending a ton of money on a luxe "retreat," giving rise to what the *New York Times*, in a recent story about higher scrutiny of expense reports, referred to as "the so-called **A.I.G.** effect."

These are always fun reads, but to be honest, for those of us who have anything to do with the sales side of this business, it's impossible not to feel a little sympathy for these hapless individuals — although more difficult in the case of **A.I.G.** — and perhaps to reflect on the highlight reel moments on our own expense report ledger.

Most of this is due to what's known as the "T & E" or "M & E" part of our budgets. The T being "Travel," which you have to do no matter what and never is any fun, so no reflection here. The M is "Meals," and since you need to eat — and on the road after a long day this might be your one pleasure, if you are lucky, even if experienced solo in some spot chosen for convenience that otherwise would in no way be a dining destination for you — no reflection here either. That leaves the "E," which stands for "Entertainment."

The word itself is troublesome. It's vague enough to cover anything from the frivolous to the extravagant to worse. Expense reports are business documents, after all, and to those people whose job is to read and process them and who themselves may never have occasion to submit one, it must be easy to

harbor doubt about the return on a company's investment in these "entertainment" claims. Once, in fact, someone who headed up an accounting and finance department at the company where I worked told me, kind of sheepishly I thought, "you basically can't entertain anymore," a policy that fortunately didn't stick and, actually, never took effect.

On the other hand, to some librarians business entertainment apparently looks like a powerful tool indeed. In a recent listserv exchange several librarians held a spirited debate, for example, over whether or not vendors should be believed when claiming to hold to the same ethical standards as librarians do. One salvo:

Here is my generalization about vendors — their goal is to sell products.

Do some vendors try to influence or bribe librarians to buy their products? Sure they do.

Well, "influence," yes, we vendors would admit to being all too guilty of trying hard at that. But the "bribe" I can only think, in the most charitable possible reading, must refer to lavish entertainments offered as implicit tit-for-tat in exchange for fat contracts — meals for deals, to boil things down.

We vendors wish it were so easy. Meals we do provide from time to time, yes, to the customers and prospective customers of our companies, and it is true, we do hope these occasions help to deepen the business relationships we have formed or hope to form with our guests. But these occasions, the dinners, lunches, breakfasts, drinks, receptions, and so on, to us are clearly just one of the things you do, need to do really, to maintain close ties with librarians, not one of whom, so far as I can tell, has ever handed over an account with any thought of what would be on the menu that night.

So a bribe, I don't think so. But, no matter, even though on the level sometimes it's hard not to feel a slight unease as you sign and submit an especially impressive expense report, even though no report any of us in the *Against the Grain* community would have occasion to file would register on the **A.I.G.** scale. This unease not because you feel you've done something illegal, or unethical, or untoward.

Instead, it's more like, "They pay me to do this?"

Those lavish entertainments? At times they are, by most standards at least. And the idea that someone would not only pick up the tab for you, later on, but would also pay you salary to throw a dinner

party, can make it feel as if you are getting away with something.

Once years ago, early on in my vendoring career, I hosted a pretty nice dinner at a conference. There were three or four of us from my company, plus six or seven librarians, all from the same library, a relatively new customer. So, a decent crowd. Everything worked that night. The restaurant was slightly off the beaten convention path. We were at the far end of a bright, lively room, in a space that seemed to belong to us. I remember a long rectangular table and its crisp white tablecloth. I remember wait staff in white coats who took good care of us and seemed to enjoy it. I remember plates of appetizers passed around this way and that, oysters, shrimp, and several other dishes. The entrees I don't remember, other than being able to say with certainty all these years later that someone in that kitchen knew how to cook. There was wine, of course, as much as anyone wanted, and under severe peer pressure, everyone ordered dessert. Whether we talked very much in the way of business, that I can barely remember — although I do vaguely recall promising to look after some detail of technical services — but I am clear to this day that there were lots of laughs around the table, and by the end of the meal we all felt like friends.

When the tab arrived, conversation was still alive around the table. So the company colleague to my right was able to quietly ask me, as I opened the wallet our waiter had delivered, "Did you break four figures?"

I had, for the first time. As I figured the tip and signed the check, I wondered if someone back home would call me in for a talk about it.

Nobody did. Years later I still think of that night as one of the best ever on the road. I hope others at that table still do too.

I've done business with that library for most of the years since. There's a chance I learned a fact or two about cataloging processes that night, an area I can always stand to know more about. I must have learned something about the library's politics, how things ran there. I might have heard some new jargon for the first time, or finally understood some acronym. And maybe during the evening I was able to put across some point about our company.

So there was value to the dinner beyond the buzz. Because I learned a few things and made a few friends, I was a slightly better rep and so the company was a slightly stronger company. I am sure no one felt they had been a party to a bribe. I'll bet, instead, that in the years that followed our guests felt they could talk more frankly to me, when the situation called for that, than if we had not enjoyed

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## Vendor Library Relations

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ourselves together that night. Could I have gotten all this with a tab that came in under four figures? No doubt. I think the company got its money's worth anyway. This library was a big customer for a long time, which helped to get more customers. Maybe a good thing we didn't stop the entertainment.

So while I'm sure there are abuses and excesses out there, those of us who send in entertainment expense reports have no reason for that guilt. It's part of the job, and not so easy as it sounds. Not everyone one could do it. Putting together a dinner takes work. Some librarians don't want to be entertained by their vendors. Some expect it. Others are surprised when you ask. Pick an early time, and there's no buzz in the room when you get there. Pick a later time, and everyone's yawning over their coffees and thinking about morning. Choosing the restaurant can be a dice roll. Take an easy one that's popular or close by, and risk a place that's too crowded. Take one that's offbeat or at some distance, and risk a disaster.

Disasters are rare. Dinners normally turn out well, if not always as well as that one those years ago. They can soften the harder moments. Maybe some people wish that entertainment had no place in business, but I'd hate to imagine this work if business really were all business. 🌸

[illegible]

**Rumors**  
*from page 79*

*sumer Annual Review: U.S. Demographics & Buying Behaviors*, edited by **Jim Milliot, Bowker**, 2010, hopefully to cheer us up!

When you run into the urbane **John Cox** at the **Conference**, be sure and ask him about the **Frankfurt Book Fair** and the two-week vacation **John** and his wife **Di** just took! But no column this time!

**Publicity abounds for the Charleston Conference!** See **Don Hawkins** of *Information Today*, <http://www.theconferencecircuit.com/2010/10/11/showdown-in-charleston-ebSCO-and-serials-solutions-face-off/>. And **Josh Hadro**, *Library Journal*, [http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/technologytechnews/886940294/infotech\\_competition\\_heats\\_up/discovery.html.csp](http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/technologytechnews/886940294/infotech_competition_heats_up/discovery.html.csp).

Gotta go! Can't tell you how many **Rumors** I have left out! But they will be in the upcoming **Dec-Jan** issue of **ATG!** Coming soon! See y'all in Charleston! 🌿